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ABSTRACT

The entries in this journal represent the second annual publication of selected material dealing with the topic of black theatre. Articles describe an evening with the Frank Silvera Writers Workshop in Harlem, relate an interview with Vinie Burrows, explore the thinking of black scholars and artists on the elements of the African-American theatre form, and outline the advantages of providing a board of directors to guide black theatre. The journal also includes a one-act play by Charles Michael Moore, "One Nickel on This Wine," based on a young man's encounter with street knowledge, and "Putting Black Theatre in the Black," a speech delivered at the Second Annual Midwest Black Theatre Alliance Conference by Dr. Carlton Molette that discusses the financial aspects of the black theatre. (MAI)

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NUMMO

A Black Theatre Journal

Summer, 1978

Editor

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(Mungu Kimya Abudu)

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On The Cover: Actress Vinie Burrows

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*This was Dr. Molette's keynote speech at the second annual
Midwest Black Theatre Alliance at Karamu House in Cleveland.

*Reprint from 'The Black American.'
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Editor's Note

I am delighted to have my suspicion of the need for NUMMO so strongly confirmed by a year of praise from its readership. It has attracted a good number of subscribers, has fostered a second printing and, most exciting of all, has been adopted by the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), which will distribute it to its 700 microfiche collections throughout the world and make it available on microfiche and printed copy to subscribing libraries. Thank you all for your enthusiastic reception.

I am also pleased to report that a high quality of material has been attracted for NUMMO's second issue. Dr. Carlton Molette expresses the need for Black theatres to work toward financial independence and offers his criticisms of current management in his keynote address to the Second Annual Midwest Black Theatre Alliance Conference, "Putting Black Theatre in the Black." Cynthia Pitts makes "A Statement on Board Development" which clearly outlines the advantages a board of directors can provide our theatres and notes several trouble spots that should be avoided in their development. In an interview, Vinie Burrows shares her experiences and views as an independent Black actress. Charles Moore's play, "One Nickel on this Wine," refurbishes the value of common sense through a young man's encounter with street savvy. "The Elements of African-American Theatre Form" documents and explores the thinking of our scholars and artists on that subject. Finally, Ellen Foreman paints a vivid portrait of the Frank Silvera Writers' Workshop in "Black Theatre Flourishes in Harlem." Many more fine articles and plays deserving of publication were submitted, but our space limitation would not allow us to share them with you.

Even as NUMMO shines, illuminating some of our best, we are faced with its first struggle for survival. I will be leaving Illinois State University this year and one of the disadvantages of my departure is that new support must be found for the journal. Discussions with several organizations already have begun in a search for a new independence, but your continued support also will be needed. Subscribers will be notified of how they may acquire next year's issue and help with the sustenance and development of their journal.

The Struggle Continues

Contributors

Dr. Carlton Molette is dean of the school of communications at Texas Southern University. He previously has held the positions of chairman of the Division of Fine Arts at Spelman College and director of the Atlanta University Summer Theatre, and he has had design and technical production experience in motion pictures, television and professional, educational and community theatre. Dr. Molette also has co-authored several plays with his wife Barbara Molette and has written numerous scholarly articles on a variety of subjects.

Cynthia Pitts is employed by the Community Relations—Social Development Commission in Milwaukee, Wis., as director of Training and Technical Assistance. She is a member of the Board of Directors of the Milwaukee Inner City Arts Council, past board member of the Afro-American Total Theatre, board member and treasurer of the Midwest Black Theatre Alliance and a member of the Board of Directors of the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre.

Vinie Burrows is a native New Yorker and a graduate of New York University. She made her Broadway debut with Helen Hayes and has since performed in a number of successful plays both on and off Broadway, appearing with Ossie Davis, Raymond St. Jacques, Mary Martin, Eartha Kitt, Godfrey Cambridge and others.

Ms. Burrows launched her career as a solo artist at Antioch College in 1963 and since then has created and produced seven distinctly different one-woman shows.

Charles Moore is a native of Ypsilanti, Mich., and has recently graduated from the University of Michigan. Among his playwriting credits are "Inky," a musical; "People on the Move," a T.V. special, and "And That's the Way it was Walter," winner of the American College Theatre Festival's David Literary Award for Playwriting.

"One Nickel on this Wine" is Mr. Moore's first award-winning play, having captured the University of Michigan's Avery Hopwood Award for Playwriting in 1974.

Mungu Kimya Abudu is the writing name of Carl Morrison. Currently a playwright, director and editor of Nummo, Mr.

Morrison received his B.A. at San Jose State University and his M.F.A. at University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He taught for three years at Antioch College and Illinois State University and has authored several plays, including "And" and "The Black Egg."

Ellen Foreman is a New Yorker and a free lance writer for the Black American Magazine.

Black Theatre Flourishes in Harlem

—An Evening with the Frank Silvera Writers' Workshop

BY ELLEN FOREMAN

It is a brisk, windy Autumn evening in Harlem, at the corner of 125th and St. Nicholas. Music blaring from a record store and the insistent shrill of police sirens from the street three floors below drift up through the windows of the theatre. It is Monday night, traditionally an "off-night" on Broadway, but here, at the Frank Silvera Writers' Workshop, theatre is flourishing.

The large, drab room, stripped down to bare essentials, begins to fill with people, mostly workshop members. Small groups gather, talking animatedly about new openings, casting opportunities, future productions. They are theatre people—writers, actors, directors, producers, choreographers, technicians—and audience to whom the theatre matters, to whom theatre is life.

The atmosphere is charged with anticipation. Many important names in theatre are present: Richard Wesley, Ron Milner, Clayton Riley, Nancy Quinn, Jean Erdman, Oyamo, Aishah Rahman, Ali Wadud. Tonight is opening night of the workshop's fifth season.

By 7:30 the audience begins to settle down into folding chairs surrounding the stage. Many hold open notebooks and pens, ready to record their own observations and reactions during the performance, in preparation for the discussion that follows. The mood is serious and intense.

There has been a slight delay, typical of the profession: an actor scheduled to read tonight has been held overtime in a film he is making and can't get here for the performance. A last-minute replacement is recruited from the audience.

The actors take their places on folding chairs on the stage.

Cast members have met together only twice before to rehearse their lines. Tonight's readers, Loretta Green, Mansoor Nageeullah, John Wells, Freddie Martin, and Barbara Lewis as the dancer, are all experienced actors. However, emphasis is not placed on acting per se, but the play as it is written. Theatrical embellishments are discouraged so as not to detract from the writing. Even stage directions are read aloud—tonight by director Claudia Smith, as Alan B. Wins, stage manager, sits beside her, coordinating music cues on a portable tape recorder.

The play tonight is *Summer Screen*, by Lennox Brown. The surface plot line is clear and easy to follow in the reading, but the subtle interrelationships of meaning that rely on movement, gesture, and spatial juxtaposition of the characters are more elusive.

The scene is summer-time, in New York, in the '60s. Sally Fisher, a school teacher in her late twenties, and her accountant husband Reggie, engage the help of a friend, Jim, and a West Indian barfly, Stardust, in organizing a People's Campaign to Save Eddie Baxter, a Black musician jailed on a drug charge. Sally's intense commitment is so totally shattered when she learns of Baxter's previous sexual involvement with two white teen-age girls ("women" she insists), that she phones the information to the District Attorney, thereby ensuring Baxter's conviction.

The play-within-the-play is a subtle, sensitive exploration of Sally's internal state, a complex psychological portrait. The use of the dancer moves the play from the external reality of the situation to the internal reality of Sally's psyche. The movements of the dancer when she is wearing a black mask allow us access to Sally's feelings. We share her fears, doubts, pain and anger.

Neglected, unappreciated, wounded by an indifferent husband she can no longer attract, Sally is unable to place the blame for her unhappiness on her husband's insensitive nature. She internalizes the responsibility, and finally projects it as the "white woman," a figment of her own imagination who she suspects is stealing her husband's love. Her political involvement is so shaped by her personal frustrations that when "the white woman" appears again as part of Eddie Baxter's past, her idealization of Eddie is destroyed, her illusions shattered. After Sally's retaliatory phone call, the dancer removes the white mask she has been wearing to reveal that she has been a Black woman all the time. The dancer is Sally herself, her own spirit driving her to destruction, her own worst enemy.

The play reading ends in a burst of applause. The audience has been listening intently to every word, catching the nuances of the language, laughing appreciatively at the satiric one-liners

that poke a serious finger at the rhetoric of the '60s. After a short break, they are ready to begin their dissection.

Tonight's moderator is the highly respected Owen Dodson, who has been an influential teacher and guide to many in the audience. Although he opens the discussion with the stated intention of only listening to the audience's responses and summing up, he couldn't help but interject his own ideas. His leading questions imply interpretation: Does the play take place in New York or in Sally's mind? Is this a satire on the mindless way society signs up for anything? Was Eddie wrong and the white prosecutor right? Is Sally's sexual jealousy, the heat of the play, symbolic of the decadence and hell our society is coming to? He succeeds in both confusing the audience about their initial responses and in eliciting an interesting variety of comments.

The audience is both knowledgeable and, by now, confused. Townsend Brewster, critic and playwright, refers to Sally's appearance in another of Brown's plays, *The Winti Train*, and therefore takes the play's reality at face value. Marcus Hemphill says he had trouble with the husband—"Is he a nit-wit?" A young Black woman is outraged at Sally's lust and declares her shallow for a woman of the '70s. (Although, she admits to the audience, "lust is important!") Garland Thompson, artistic director of the workshop, tries to draw the discussion back to structure, pointing out the way the play tracks like music and the stylistic economy by which stage directions are incorporated into the dialogue. A man sketching portraits in the front row said he felt the absence of stage directions until he realized the meaning was deep beneath the lines.

All this time the playwright sits in a silence enforced by the moderator's format, breaking in here and there, anxious to respond, only to be chastized by Dodson: "You'll get your chance, young man!" He finally does get his chance, and says gently, but pointedly, that the audience has been too easily led by a very skillful teacher.

Brown continues: "Good art, such as this play, is like a diamond; it reflects many lights." He gets a good laugh for his chutzpah, and explains that this play is written on many levels. It is both realistic and symbolic. "Although the play examines a Black marriage, the theme, the slow deterioration of a woman's mind because of lack of affection, both physical and emotional, is universal. The theme is particularly relevant to Black women because they are often neglected in a society like this where, numerically, circumstances are romantically favorable to Black men.

The formal critique ends, but discussion and debate continue

in small groups as people make their way slowly to the door. The intellectual level is very high. Here theatre is treated seriously as art; craft and skill are highly valued. Artistic vision and voice, not commercial potential, are the criteria of success.

Tonight's session was both typical and somewhat different from the usual Monday night meetings. The type of discussion will depend primarily on the artistic quality of the word read. Plays are offered for different reasons: either to expose the play to the workshop or to expose the workshop to the play. The beauty of this approach is that one week the workshop will hear a piece by Lennox Brown, an experienced, published writer whose work has been produced internationally, and another week a piece by Denise Bell, a new writer whose work may have never been heard before.

This reciprocal approach, the exchange between new and established writers, is the foundation of the project. Garland Lee Thompson, who, with the invaluable assistance of Pat White, Karen Baxter, and Marcus Hemphill, runs the workshop, emphasizes the vital need for a safe place where a writer's work will be treated seriously, compassionately and respectfully. Criticism must never be destructive. He recalls one evening when Richard Wesley asked a writer whose work had just been read if this was his first play. When the response was affirmative, Wesley replied: "Then go ahead and write another one."

Thompson stresses the need for exposure, the key to his workshop concept: "I knew you had to trust people with your work. It wasn't who you knew, but who knew you."

The result is a network of artists—writers, actors, directors—who know each others' work. The "Silvera Hit List," a compilation of readings done over the past four years, reads like a Who's Who in Black Theatre. Writers and Moderators have included Ntozake Shange, Charles Fuller, Lloyd Richard, Alexis DeVeaux, Dan Owens, Ed Bullins, Charles Gordone, Adrienne Kennedy, Paul Carter Harrison, and Philip Hayes Dean, among many others.

Thompson refers to workshop members as a family, a family whose numbers keep growing. Begun originally in 1973 by a group of twelve writers who, frustrated by the unavailability of places to air their work, decided to meet on a regular, basis at the Hotel Martinique, the group remains committed to its original concept—to offer a place for writers of greatest need, who, in Thompson's terms, are usually "non-male, non-rich, and minority." Consequently, the workshop has introduced more than forty new Black women writers. This year, a play by Sam Shirakawa, an Asian-American writer, is scheduled for reading.

Continuing expansion is also evident in the number of plays that begin in the workshop and move out into professional stage productions. Wesley's *The Last Street Play*, which opened on Broadway this past season, is one example. Three plays opened at the Theatre of the Open Eye in late October and November. Woodie King, Jr., the most prominent Black producer in the city, picked up three plays for production at the New Federal Theatre. Other works have moved into the Manhattan Theatre Club, Papp's Public Theatre, Ellen Stewart's La Mama E.T.C., and NEC, among others. New networks are continually opening up.

It is ironic that at a time when financial cutbacks threaten even well-established artistic institutions, at a time when public attention paid to the Black theatre movement of the '60s has passed, at a time when rumors that "Black theatre is dead" are rampant, that we find such excitement, creativity, and talent in a third-floor walk-up on 125th Street. Perhaps this is the center of a new Harlem Renaissance.

An Interview with Vinie Burrows

BY CARL MORRISON

Edited by Teresa Savage

CM: Miss Burrows, how did you get into acting? What made you decide to become an actress?

VB: Well, I suppose that you don't decide to become a performer, you are *obsessed* with the idea of performing. That idea grabs hold of you and willy nilly you have to go with it—wherever it leads you. Sort of like getting a tiger by the tail, you can't let go of it.

But in all seriousness, I suppose that the beginning of my desires to be in theatre had their origins in a neurotic need to get away from what I considered a humdrum life or what I considered an unsatisfying life, certainly in the eyes of a child. My desire to be in the theatre goes back as long as I can remember, so it was a fulfillment of a kind of fantasy life.

Of course, I can excuse myself by saying that if we look at any profession there are neurotic or even pathological elements in the choice. I like to say, "Why does a surgeon want to be a surgeon or someone who likes to cut, as opposed to an internist who wants to examine?" As a child I had very strongly the need to live a life other than my own; and, I did that by escaping into a world that others had made. Now of course, if that were to have been the entire end of it, I certainly could not have achieved any kind of real distinction or what I call staying power because one must go from those neurotic elements and work through them with other kinds of life experiences. I consider myself a professional in terms of the theatre.

CM: Are there any milestones or changes that characterize major moments in the development of your career?

VB: Well, I think it is very hard to catalogue and say that at period A in my development I was different than I was at period B. It's been a continuous, dynamic process. You reach a stage and you say, "Wow! I am at a level of accomplishment that I wouldn't have dreamed of several years ago and I don't know how I got there."

Maybe it sounds unrealistic, but I do not try to concentrate on where I have been, although it is necessary to know where one has been. Instead, I am always looking forward to where I am, where I am going, and where I want to go.

CM: Could you talk a little bit about your one woman show?

VB: The idea of solo performances initially grew out of a rage and my frustration with the commercial theatres' reluctance to use my talents. I was energetic enough and angry enough to say to myself, "Well goddamit, if you don't use me to do the big things I will create my own one woman show, doing the great things myself."

Acting is an art. In order to develop that craft you have to sharpen your teeth on the big things. I think Robert Browning once said that a man's reach should exceed his grasp or else what is a heaven for.

The same thing is true for the artist, whether it is the performing artist, the actor, the singer, the dancer, the graphic artist or the plastic artist. You have got to know what the big roles are. You have to know what past masters have done and you have to go and do the things they did. Once you have done this you can, in a sense, break through that boundary and create your own forms.

CM: How did you go about selecting material for your first one woman show?

VB: The very first show which I put together was after I had been in Germany with a dear lady who died recently, Ethel Waters. I was playing her daughter Beulah in Thornton Wilder's play *Happy Journey from Newark to Trenton*. I was received very well by the German audience in this classic American play. Its theme is universal: the daughter has lost a child and her mother comes to comfort her. It was amazing that I had to go 3,000 miles away from home to play a classic role in the theatre.

Well, I said, "I can do it. I can assemble my own show." I came back and got together something that I call *The Female of the Species*: vignettes with seven women ranging from *Alice in Wonderland* through *Juliet*. It included a calypso lullaby, a piece by Oscar Wilde, something by Poe, and it ended with Langston Hughes' "Mother to Son."

My show was received very well and I did it everywhere I

could find a captive audience: in jails, in schoolhouses, places like that. I will never forget the reaction of a woman who is now on the counsel of Actors' Equity. She saw me perform and told me that nobody is interested in seeing a Black actress doing a bravura performance.

CM: What effect did that have on your approach to what you were doing?

VB: I continued with that program, but being a practical person I knew that I had to find a program that people would pay to see. As a performer I could always create and demand attention from an audience. Still, I wanted to assemble a program with a theme that would be attractive to a paying audience. Actually, it took many programs and many life experiences before I finally got *Walk Together Children*.

I drew my material from my own experiences and from events happening around me. During the time of war I did a peace program, *From Swords to Plowshares*. When I got pregnant I did, *The Waiting Game*. Anything was an excuse to do research and to develop a program.

Eventually, I was asked by a woman who was the head of the Art Department of the *New York Times* to do a program of African material because she wanted to relate it to modern art and cubism. I went to the library and found the African folktales and did them for her. She was literally enchanted and gave me names of people I should contact—chiefly African studies departments. That program became a moneymaker for me. Soon I discovered that I could take excerpts of the longer program and do the African folklore in schools and have a steady source of income.

Around that same time I was asked to do a church service at St. Clemens in New York City; that's where the American Place Theatre started. I told the vicar I'd do something about the war and he said he already had a lot on the war and suggested I do something about the Negro experiences in 1967. I agreed and I got together a half hour program called *Walk Together Children*. The response of that church audience told me that this was it. So, I expanded it and opened off-Broadway in 1968.

The first half is largely background and historical and remains the same. The second half is different, it's contemporary. When I first opened in New York, Clive Barnes, the *New York Times* drama critic, said that I was a magnificent performer and I ran crying to the bank. That's literally what it does for you when you get that kind of endorsement. I've been on the "Today Show" and I booked myself in colleges and that's the way it's been.

What's interesting, though, is that with those notices and unanimous raves, had I been a white performer I would have been

sent scripts, Hollywood would have beckoned, all of the soaps would have had me on. But for me—nothing . . . nothing . . .

CM: Was this the first time you realized that as a Black actress, regardless of the quality of your work, certain opportunities would be withheld from you?

VB: In my naivete and yet knowing what a racist society this is (racist meaning institutions that deny equality of opportunity solely because of a person's race), I made one effort to neutralize that by creating my one woman show. Still naive, I would say, "You see how good I am—you just didn't have an opportunity to see it before. Now that you see it, aren't you going to use me?"

Well, of course, what I didn't realize was the very fact that I did it myself says that I am an independent person and the purveyors of flesh and art in this country are not interested in any independent person. They are interested in hungry people because hungry people do whatever they ask them to do.

Now I look at myself and say, "Wow—look at what I escaped! Could I have resisted the lure of national exposure by way of *Blackula* or *Superfly*—could I have resisted that?" But now I know I have my own and that gives me great satisfaction and some measure of economic independence.

I feel that I have created something and that makes me so happy that I encourage others to do the same. A woman called me about a week ago to say that she had seen me perform at Grinnell College and I had influenced her to try her own one woman show. I performed some place else and a man in the audience told me that he had seen me perform at Antioch College and that performance had literally changed the direction of his life. You feel good about things like that.

CM: Let's talk some about another aspect of your work. How do you balance acting with the business side of production?

VB: Any woman who successfully manages her home, which may include a husband and a child, is already automatically in what I call "mental management." If you extend into business the same techniques and abilities you use in running your home successfully, you can also be a successful businesswoman.

CM: When you were working off-Broadway, did you join the union?

VB: Oh, you have to join the union. I was never active with the Actors' Equity, of course I am a union member. Frankly, I don't think our union is all it professes to be. I was incensed when our union found it difficult to take a position on South Africa, such as an official sanctioning or chastizing. But, it is true the union

was active in getting two South African actors released from prison.

CM: Do you know of other incidents involving Actors' Equity and Black performers or minority issues?

VB: There is a committee that is working on better representation of minorities in casting. This committee recently wrote a plaintive letter to our house organization saying that it feels ineffectual. One of the reasons they wrote the letter was because an attempt to institute open casting had failed. They thought they would try, within their own ranks, to cast a play openly. Only 16 of the 400 people who came down to audition were Black. Ten were hired. It was discouraging because no more came out.

Maybe the union was wrong to give up after this attempt failed or maybe I'm also at fault because I am not more active in the union. I am, however, more active with groups that I feel have greater clout in changing the system, for example Women for Racial and Economic Equality. They've issued a call to working women all over the country and this is one of the few groups I know where the membership is representative of women at every strata of American life: working class women, middle class white women, Spanish women, Asian and Black women.

While I'm talking about involvement, I think the arts, and the funding for art is becoming quite political. It behooves Black artists, both as individuals and as groups, to become associated with organizations such as the Black Theatre Alliance and vocal community theatre groups. Then perhaps some of the larger sums of money that comes through legislation and from private funding could be syphoned off into the Black community.

One of the things that Americans don't realize is that the arts are very important to our lives. It is my feeling that the same way that we have a bar and a church on every corner, we should have a theatre on every corner. Theatre nourishes the soul and the spirit. I believe it is very important for those of us who are in the theatre to make bonds among ourselves, to know what is going on politically, and to go to those persons controlling the money with some show of strength.

CM: The late '60s and early '70s brought forth a great burst of material and work related to the Black experience in this country. Do you think that today it is important for the Black actor to use his craft to speak to political issues?

VB: Oh yes. When I am involved in a political struggle I am not only involved as a Black actress, I am involved as a Black person. We must attack the issues, lay out the issues, and sometimes present the issues.

CM: Could you tell me something about the kinds of technique you use, what you've studied, and what kinds of things are important in an actor's training.

VB: Well, fundamentally, the actor has the voice and body—that tells it all. The actor has to also have the mind and the ability to choose and select. Now that is it in a nutshell.

It takes many years, and we're talking about a lifetime, to build up technique. One can learn to speak in a certain way, and move in a certain way. Yet, we all know of those who do very brilliant things technically, but lack great artistry. What else has to happen is a fusing of this characterization with humanity, the spirit, the soul, if you would call it that. I call it the divinity that is in all of us.

CM: What advice on technique could you give a new or aspiring actress?

VB: A truism, particularly applicable to theatre, is that a great art is simple. You spend all your life as an artist trying to achieve simplicity, trying to throw away the excesses and going to the line, to the movement, to the form, which says in its purest what you want to say most fully. When you watch performers, particularly when you watch young performers, one is often amused by their excesses—their "business." It takes a lifetime to understand how powerful it is to be quiet.

CM: What do you think is the one key factor that separates a good actor from a great one?

VB: The ability to recreate a brilliant performance night after night—that is what makes a champion. All the good ones, no matter what the discipline, have their way of achieving it. I can quote many performers who give brilliant performances which they never repeat.

You can learn from all of them. You will eventually find your own way. You take clues, get inspiration from different sources, but in the final analysis, you have to find something to give it *your* signature.

CM: We often refer to the origins of African American music as being the Black church. What do you think are the origins or roots of the Black American actor?

VB: Well, one of the things that I discovered at FESTAC* is that, regardless of the medium, it was impossible to see the Black artist without recognizing that we do have a common background which is a rhythm, which is a beat. When the slaves came here from Africa, they brought this highly sophisticated and complex thing with them. The beat is in music, the beat is in the language, the beat is in art, the beat is in the way we walk, no matter where we are. If we are true to the Africanism of us, and

think that is the dominant gene, we are true to the beat. It comes out.

I say that the rhythm that I have, the energy that I have, is essentially an African energy, even though one might say that it comes out of a European technique. But, when you really think of the strength of what I do, the strength comes out of my African being.

CM: As a result of that, does the Black actor performing a role that was written for a white actor change the statement?

VB: I don't think so. I do Irish women and a German woman in my programs. I become possessed by those women and I think my performance is true to the author's intent.

My beat, my African beat, as I call it, does not in any way change the author's intent. I think if anything, it sharpens my performance. I could not understand the rhythm of the Irish mother, without having a certain force within myself.

CM: What about the audience who sees a Black Italian?

VB: The audience sees what you want them to see. When Leontyne Price sings Tosca, she is Italian because her artistry creates that illusion. If they don't see what you want them to, then you as an actor haven't done it.

CM: Thank you.

VB: I'd like to add that it's been stimulating to have to re-think ideas and express them because it clarifies them in my mind. The process of evaluating and understanding and analyzing goes on all the time. It's good to stop and ask where am I, and what am I doing.

I am glad to share my thoughts with you and your readers. I would love to get written comments from others who may read this interview.

The Elements of African American Theatre Form

BY MUNGU KIMYA ABUDU

There have been many attempts in the past to define the elements of theatre art. Most of these have been undertaken by scholars of European decent, but recently there have been strides taken by African and African-American scholars and artists to give definition to the traditional and contemporary elements which make up theatre. It is necessary to understand one's own tools before one can express oneself with them. Therefore, from the perspective of an African-American artist, I will attempt to analyze these tools or elements of Black theatre, given the information of several African and African-American scholars and artists.

Vicki Ezeokoli, in her article, "The Study of African Theatre," observes:

For the traditional African, as for many non-Western peoples, the theatre is a dynamic collaboration of the several arts of poetry, dance, music, the visual and plastic arts.

It is her belief that the elements of the theatre are reasonably universal, but she contends that different cultures have given particular emphasis to the use of various elements.

The single most important difference between the traditional African theatre and the Western theatre is that the latter is predominantly verbal while the former retains a dynamic tension and balance between the several arts.

Scott Kennedy's description of the elements of traditional African-American theatre is a bit more complex, and indicates the

ethical basis upon which this theatre is founded.³ The elements are connected directly to the lives of the people and might be described as:

1. Ritual— with libations and prayers.
2. Verse— with spoken forms and sung forms, including speech surrogates such as drums, bells and flutes.
3. Music— as dramatic communication; including symbols, instrument sounds such as signals, speech surrogates, song forms and chorus, proverbs, tales and riddles.
4. Dance— including movement expression.
5. Regalia— including the use of masks, stools, skins and weapons.

Kennedy says that the stage is a natural one and has as its basis man's relationship to the universe. The interesting addition in his designation of the elements is that they are an integral part of the lives of the people who perform the theatre. Ezeokoli's poetry, dance, music visual and plastic arts can be found here, but the element of "ritual" suggests a more spiritual view of the theatre.

Bridging the traditional with contemporary African-American forms of theatre is an essay by Oliver Jackson which prefaces Paul Carter Harrison's *Kuntu Drama* and a book entitled *The Drama of Nommo*, written by Mr. Harrison.

In his essay Jackson explains that, since African sensibility and world view were not destroyed in the diaspora from the African continent to America and other parts of the world, the concept of the fundamental spiritual nature of man and the universe is still with African-Americans and in their art.

The play is the ritualized context of reality. The ritual confirms the mode: it is a living incantation that focuses power to invoke and release beneficent power to the audience.

In Jackson we can see an African-American scholar defining the theatre of Black America as being ethically founded on the traditional forms. The theatre is no longer just a piece of art for art's sake, but rather a ritualizing of life and a means for the invocation and release of beneficent powers to the audience.

The tools for focusing this power are more thoroughly discussed by Harrison in *The Drama of Nommo*. He entitles these tools "song, dance and drum," manifestations of which might be the text, the gesture, or the music of a play, respectively. Song, dance and drum are not, however, limited to these manifestations. According to his definition, drum, for instance, is found in the

rhythms of speech, thus embellishing the text or song.

One cannot help but think back to the 1960s when Larry Neal, Don L. Lee and many other Black artists and scholars began demanding redefinition of themselves as artists and the creation of new forms and values. It seems that some definitions are arriving via close analysis of existing Black life styles and changing artistic forms.

However, looking closely at the above mentioned sets of tools we can see that while neither of them may in itself be completely perfect for our needs, a combination may serve us well.

Sister Ezeokoli seems to have taken lightly the spiritual nature of African theatre. It might simply be that she took it for granted, but whatever the case, it is not discussed in her brief description of that theatre's elements and nature. John Mbiti in *African Religions and Philosophies* tells us that:

Because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and secular, between religious and non-religious, between spiritual and the material areas of life.

If we believe this, then traditional theatre must also be connected to the sacred and the spiritual. Observations made by Brother Kennedy would tend to support this belief.

Most beneficial of what Sister Ezeokoli has said is her reference to the fact that African theatre remained more balanced in its use of the elements of the theatre than did Western theatre.

As a director of African-American theatre I have had occasion to encounter both highly literary plays and those that lend themselves more easily and freely to a more balanced use of the other elements. Although I cannot divorce myself entirely from the "word" play, it is my opinion that the more traditional the components that contribute to the development of African-American forms of theatre, the more serviceable those forms will be to the African-American community. Therefore, the evidence would indicate that a "dynamic balance" in the use of the elements can be most beneficial.

This brings us to the question of the connection of African-American theatre to the daily lives of its people. I believe that the evidence supports the community's more spiritual and less secular use of their theatre. In traditional forms we see ritualistic aspects of the event adding to its significance. In more recent theories, analysis of African-American forms and observations of community responses to theatre, we find the theatre, to a degree, serving as a "living incantation that focuses power to invoke and release power to the audience."

I think that Paul Harrison has been very successful in describing, from an African-American perspective, the dynamic forces that, when focused by man's intelligence become the "ritualized context of reality." Indeed, one could call the rhythmically informed conversation or poetry of African-American theatre a "song." The movement of its participants could well be called "dance" and the activating force of the music and text of the play find authentication in the talking "drum."

Mr. Harrison, however, does not give emphasis to the environment in which the event takes place. What about the iconography of image? What about the *image* or the costumes, properties and settings? Ezeokoli makes reference to the plastic and visual arts. Kennedy notices the use of certain regalia. I suggest that traditional theatre forms have made full use of *image*. As a director whose responsibility it is to orchestrate the ensemble of song, dance and drum, I would be without all of my instruments if I could not get *image* in the band. Its use may also invoke spiritual forces. It may act as an element in concert with song, dance and drum.

In Imamu Baraka's *Slave Ship* a burned Black baby doll is thrown at the feet of the classic "Uncle Tom." The act electrifies the event and continues to invoke the spirit of the innocent dead as long as it remains visible. These icons are necessary tools. The choices of the playwrights, designers and directors determine whether or not they are used.

What, then, is being said by our scholars and artists if we approach their work with pragmatic thinking. What are the essential elements with which the African-American artist must work in order to honor the continuum? They seem to be saying that they are song, dance, drum and image. These tools must be used in an integrated and balanced fashion and with purpose. The tools must be employed to ritualize the sacred and make sacred the reality of our African-American World view.

No, this is not *simply* theory. It is theory, yes, but across the country, I have witnessed the work of writers providing texts that are more and more suitable to this concept of theatre. Look at Adrienne Kennedy; look at Clay Goss, Lennox Brown, Paul Harrison and others. I have seen directors approaching these authors' works, and even the works of authors whose materials are less conducive, with this process of integrating elements and with spiritual motives. In other words, I have seen many Black Artists who are already doing it our own way because it *works* for us.

A Statement on Board Development

BY CYNTHIA PITTS

I am a member of the board of directors of the Milwaukee Inner City Arts Council which is a nine-year-old Black community-based organization. Our membership is open to anyone who cares to support Black theatre and pay our membership fees. However, control of the organization remains among the Blacks in our community. I am also a member of the board of directors of the Afro-American Total Theatre. I have, therefore, had an opportunity to participate in the development of arts organizations and work toward trying to build arts institutions. I have examined some of the experiences our boards have come through and to an extent have been able to codify them. I can see now that if "X" happens, then "Y" can be the expected result.

I am not an artist, but in recent years I have found myself qualifying that statement by saying that my art is the building of Black arts institutions. I have, therefore, listed some reasons why I think such an art form or board development is necessary to the preservation, growth and development of Black arts and I have outlined several of the major problems faced in developing boards.

Among the advantages of having a board are the base of support it provides, its ability to facilitate continuity, the accountability for artistic standards and organizational resources it can provide, and the fact that it is representative of a defined constituency that can affirm the relationship between the artist and the community.

A board provides a base. It is a source of leverage. It consists of people who have invested in their community. By "invested" I

mean, however our people invest. It might be by living in that area, maintaining a business there, paying rent in that area or going to church there. Their lives are in that community, so it is safe to say that you are talking about people who have experience in its manipulation. They have influence in the community. Thus a board provides the kind of base that the individual artist cannot have as a single person, regardless of the importance of his work, because you are talking about a collective. You are talking about a group. You are talking about joining forces on a mission or joining in the responsibility for sustaining the artists' effort.

A board also facilitates continuity. One artist, one founder or one organization may leave, taking their expression to another community. They may decide to change their involvement. They may get sick. Any number of things may happen. A board, however, remains in the community. The continuity of that artistic institution is sustained. It might be necessary to bring in a new artist, a new staff person, or what have you, but the board itself will remain to insure the continued effort, to sustain and develop art and culture in its community, even if the individual leaves.

What is the nature of our art? It is diverse. Who is accountable for what the standard of art is in our community? A board provides some level of accountability. Because what we might support, other people might question, we are responsible for what we support and we must maintain it at a certain level of competency. All of our names are behind it. We are not going to move. We have to live in our community. If the artists' work comes into question, we are going to assume some responsibility for defining our mission and explaining our reference point. We are going to hold ourselves accountable. Since we know that Afro-Americans are continually in a state of struggle over how much is slave and how much is African, or how much is American and how much is African, we can pull each other by the coat when our ambivalence is going too far to one end or the other of the continuum. In this way we can make sure that our view, our reference frame for what is Black art, remains true to the standards we have set and the mission we have chosen.

We also can be held accountable for resources. How are the people, the money, the materials and equipment being used? Are the greatest number of people from our community benefitting from these resources? Is the staff being paid? What is the payroll? Are our taxes being paid? We can assume that responsibility. What, to me, is so important about this is that we would want our artists to be responsible for the development of the art form. They should not have to be responsible for every aspect of the logistics

of holding together an organization. For a board to become conscious of that means that the artists have to let them know they are needed in that area. The extent to which the board is conscious is directly related to the artists' freedom to be creative and to serve the community by developing and growing and expanding and emerging and making bigger what is in fact our art in our community. It is also directly related to the artists' ability to produce with regularity and develop his audience.

Finally, if we say that Black art should be rooted in the Black community and the community does not feel that an expression, art form, collection of people or, let's say, an artist is a part of them; then I don't care how much that artist wants to say, rhetorically, "I am of the Black community," they are not related in any way to the constituency. Therefore, there is a very real question as to how much Black art is actually rooted in the community.

A board is representative of a defined constituency that affirms the relationship between the community which nurtures the artist and the art that serves the community. In other words, the board represents a defined audience who have declared what they think is art. The question of whether art should be for art's sake always arises where Black art is concerned. The universality of our art is always being questioned. The board represents that constituency that will challenge anyone who would try to define our universality for us. They can say that what our artists are doing is universal to us, that it is from our experience and expresses us. It is not simply one person speaking.

With that as an outline of what a board is and can do, let me go briefly to some of the growing pangs of a community based board. Among them are learning to make collective decisions, working out and recognizing the problems with distribution of power, hiring the right administrator and recognizing the limitations in the board's scope.

Prior to the last four or five years, we were talking about the revolution being, "Nigger, can you kill? Nigger, do you have a gun?" However, the nature of the revolution for me at this point concerns our willingness to love intensely enough to train ourselves for the struggle that is inherent in trying to build, using only each other as resources. Therefore, one of the major growing pangs is learning the collective problem-solving and decision-making process in which an organization has to engage.

Geniuses, creative people or dynamos of energy, knowing the options available to them, often set their eyes on where we need to move, and tend to move in that direction alone if we are not fast enough to keep up with them and support their effort. If these peo-

ple are to benefit from boards, the challenge to them and all of us is in whether corporate decisions can be reached. I am not talking about artistic decisions, or even administrative decisions, where an organization has a paid administrator, but corporate commitments. In making these commitments concerning major moves, the board must decide as a whole to take the step. One of the hardest things for a collection of people to do is to realize when the group has made a decision. The group must make the decision because it is going to cost all of them something in image, resources and work. You want to be sure that you have agreed to it and will now hold each other accountable.

Often what happens in new or emerging organizations is that somebody will come up with a brilliant idea, another single person will say that it is a brilliant idea, and everybody else will sit with very accepting expressions on their faces. After the meeting is adjourned and it is time to move toward raising some money, getting volunteers to build a set or traveling to Chicago or Milwaukee to struggle, you discover that you did not have the collective decision or the sweet consensus that you thought you had. Therefore, one of the biggest struggles these organizations have is learning to feel comfortable with conflict, comfortable with confronting the implications of a proposal, and willing to struggle together.

Now, we say that we are all Black, we are all for the survival of Black art and culture. We do not want to argue. However, if you raise an ingenious idea, a question may occur to me, the answer to which will determine whether I will put my body on the line in support of your idea. If I tell myself that raising the question may cause someone on the board to think I am against the idea or break the spirit of the proposal and thereby do not ask the question, the result may be that when you need me the most, I am not there. We need to know if everybody is ready to agree on the idea. Maybe a compromise is needed or something different needs to be done. We need to learn how to collectively understand problem-solving and decision-making and to deal with it creatively. I am not talking about the kind of situation where we go away feeling pain and suffering because we have abused each other, but one in which we are developing the kind of relationship where we can even fight and get down to "Goddams" and those kind of things, without dismissing the love. We must collectively make the decision for or against the proposal and move on to the next level of struggle. I think, in a quiet way, this is the nature of the revolution around the country today, because we are about institution building.

Another growing pang regards the marriage that should exist between board and staff. Since we have not in the past been

builders of institutions, with the exception of churches and fraternal orders, but have rather been oppressed by them, we are very often uncomfortable with the use of power. Let's say an organization has raised \$10,000. The people who are deciding how that money is going to be spent have power. Often what happens with new groups is that they get to the place where they can hire a staff person and they have problems defining the territorial boundaries within which that person is to function. The board pays the person and must hold him responsible for certain duties, but where does the board's responsibility end and the staff person's begin. The boundaries often become distorted. Roles have to be continually clarified and the process becomes easier as their group grows older. In areas where your mission is greater than your paid staff, you will wind up with board members volunteering and not being clear about where the authority lies. Some boards, for example, may have their founder as a member of the board and serving on the staff, or a staff person hiring a board member to perform certain tasks. A distortion can occur in the process because people are not clear about the fact that they are wearing two hats. Hypothetically, consider a situation where the founder of an arts institution and a graphic artist are both sitting on the institution's board. The founder is also the institution's chief administrator. The organization has a major graphic arts project to be contracted and engages the artist who sits on the board. The administrator becomes responsible for holding the artist, who is now a contractor, accountable for a product.

These are the realities of our situation. Some people say that is a conflict of interest and should not exist. I do not think we have that luxury. I think that if the Milwaukee Inner City Arts Council gets a little piece of money and has to contract, we will hire the person who is a part of our struggle before reaching out to some artist who has been watching us ring and twisting for a number of years and has never come to help us. That seems logical to me, but it has structural problems of which we need to be conscious.

A third problem is that we sometimes do not hire a competent administrator, and, as a result, we are forced to trust the person to go ahead about the business of administering our program or theatre without asking every day if he did something correctly or handstringing the person by demanding that we check off on his work at every turn. Most boards are composed of volunteers, which means they have to work and are not at the institution daily. If the administrator has to have his work checked or his decisions okayed, that means he must wait until the next board meeting or try to poll the board by phone. Polling, of course, is a very risky business, especially if the issue is controversial.

The struggle of a board is to understand that the board is responsible for deciding the mission, insuring the survival and setting the major goals and priorities of the institution, while the administrator is responsible for carrying that out. The extent to which we can be supportive of each other and deal successfully in those roles will determine how sound and healthy the organization will be.

We generally have so few resources that we have to get the best. In terms of staff, the "best" means a person who has prior demonstrated experience and formal training in what you want to hire them to do. In the early '60s we hired the persons who could best articulate what we wanted and make us feel good about it. We were back into the old church art form, where we just felt spiritual about what they were going to do. We did not bother to check whether or not they could do it and as a result the growth took longer. That is not to say that we should not be providing a training ground, but we must provide the training ground at the entry level. We do not put entry level people into positions of high responsibility, unless we want to run it ourselves.

Finally, the organization has to understand its limits. It has to set a mission, decide it is in the business of accomplishing that mission and raise the money necessary. Art is so unprotected in our communities that the need is very great. Often we decide that we are going to fulfill all of those needs and begin to expend our energy and our money broadly, only to discover in the final analysis that the things we think are most important are suffering from a shortage of resources. We need to set priorities and get the most important things done first.

If a board can make collective decisions, manage its power distribution, hire correctly and be honest about its limitations, it can provide a base, facilitate continuity, become accountable, root the artist in the community and be about the business of expanding, developing and nurturing Black art and culture in our communities.

One Nickel on This Wine

BY: CHARLES MICHAEL MOORE

Cast in order of appearance:

Dewey Williams
Old Jake
Lucille
Man

Time:

Anytime, any night

Place:

Any ghetto thoroughfare

Scene: *A street corner late one night. On the corner are a street light and a mail box DSR. USL is the wall of a building. The lighting is bright around the street light, but filters off around the building:*

At rise: *Dewey Williams is leaning on the mail box smoking a cigarette. Dewey is a good looking 24 year old Black man. His actions and mannerisms are full of emotions that are afraid to surface. When they do surface, Dewey is not sure how to control them. Sitting down against the wall of the building is the 44 year old frame of a wino. Old Jake, as he calls himself, is unshaven and unwashed. He has on an old, dirty army surplus overcoat that is too big for him. At this time he is slumped over with his head on his knees. He looks to be asleep. A wine bottle in a brown paper bag is lying beside him. Dewey doesn't notice old Jake. He just stands there feeling very depressed about something, taking long*

drags on a cigarette. After a few seconds, a 35 year old prostitute named Lucille enters from stage left. Once visible to the audience, she stops, looks at Dewey a few seconds and then laughs at him:

Lucille: Well, look whose back out here again. Mister, if I didn't know no better, I'd swear that you was trying to take over my block.

Dewey: *(Turning away and talking softly)* Look, I don't wanna be bothered.

Lucille: *(Moving closer to him)* What did you say honey? Did I see you shape your mouth to say something?

Dewey: *(Louder)* I said that I don't want to be bothered.

Lucille: Am I bothering you honey? You too good to talk to me? I mean, I done seen you so much on my block that I thought you was some kin to me or something.

Dewey: Lady, I just.....

Lucille: Lady? Now just hold on one second there, mister. I ain't no lady. I'm a hoe, a female hoe. And I'm proud to say that there's one hell of a difference, you hear me?.....Lady.....

Dewey: It's just a figure of speech. I'm sorry I said it.

Lucille: What's your name, mister?

Dewey: *(He thinks a second)* Dewey.

Lucille: In case you wanna know, mines Lucille.

Dewey: *(Nods)* Lucille.

Lucille: How come you're out here damn near every night? *(He doesn't answer)* Figured you wasn't gonna answer. Didn't even wanna tell me your name did you? If that is your name. Seems wrong to tell a hoe your name don't it?.....She musta really did you a job.

Dewey: *(Can't help but react)* Who?

Lucille: Oh, oh. Looks like we done hit us a sharp bed spring. Some lady got you out here, Mr. Dewey? She got you walking the street? *(Thinks about what she just said)* Walk.....? Me and you in the same business ain't we?

Dewey: Look, uh, Lucille...

Lucille: Imagine that. I bet you thought you had a real fancy lady too, didn't you?.....Got you walking the block. Um, um, um.....

Dewey: Why don't you go on and leave me alone? Hell can't I stand out here and smoke this cigarette without some h...uh, broad messing with me? *(From stage left enters a rather large Black man who stands listening to conversation)*

Lucille: What was you about to say? Did the word "hoe" trin on your teeth or something?

Dewey: Woman will you get the fuck on away from here and leave me alone!?!

Man: *(Hearing this he rushes over and confronts Dewey)* What you say, niggah? You don't go around talking to women like that. You show some respect.

Dewey: Huh? Who are you?

Man: None of your damn business. Apologize to her.

Dewey: What!?!

Man: You heard me.

Dewey: Man, I ain't apologizing to no hoe.

Man: *(Grabs his collar)* You a lie. *(Rares back to hit him)*

Dewey: Okay, okay. You ain't got to get all violent with it. *(To Lucille)* Damn, I'm sorry. *(To Man)* Is that alright?

Man: I don't know. *(To Lucille)* Think I should still hit him?

Lucille: Why don't you save your strength for something a little bit better than that?

Man: What you got in mind?

Lucille: I'll tell you what...let's go talk about it over a drink.

Man: Now that sounds like a good idea. *(She hooks his arm and they move off stage right)* We might can talk about a whole bunch of things.

Lucille: Sure is a good chance for it.

Dewey: *(Watching them as they go away)* Ain't this a trip? That niggah coulda killed me. I can just see the headlines now..... "Dewey Williams beat to death by a two legged black bull over a prostitute." I wonder what she would say? Yeah, she'd probably say something like.....

Old Jake: One nickel. *(Raising only his head)* That's all I need on this wine, brother. One nickel.

Dewey: (*Looking back to the wall*) Who are you?

Old Jake: (*Getting up*) Old Jake's the name and wine is my shame. (*Wine bottle in hand, he moves into the light*) You got that nickel?

Dewey: Old man, how long you been over there?

Old Jake: I said Old Jake not old man. 'Cause I ain't old. I just calls myself old 'cause so much wine's done aged in my kidneys. Now where's the nickel at?

Dewey: (*Goes in pocket and gives him a quarter*) Here. Now you got 20¢ towards the next bottle.

Old Jake: Then I better give you some change back 'cause this gonna be my last bottle.

Dewey: Aw man, you know you don't believe that yourself.

Old Jake: I ain't no liar now. I does a lotta things, but ly-ing ain't one of 'em. You got a cigarette?

Dewey: (*Sighs*) Yeah, man. (*Gets pack*) Here.

Old Jake: You ain't gotta act like that. I ain't beggin'. That's one thing you ain't never heard me do. Beg. (*Digging in his pockets*) Got a match?

Dewey: (*Gives him a light*) Man, damn.

Old Jake: (*After taking a couple long drags*) She your wife or your girlfriend?

Dewey: Who? That woman that just left?

Old Jake: Now, I don't mean old Lucille. I'm talking 'bout the girl that got you out here.

Dewey: If this ain't about the noseyist neighborhood.....

Old Jake: Ain't nobody nosey. Just ain't dumb. Only one thing can put a person out on the block like this, and that's another person. Wanna tell me about it?

Dewey: Hell naw, Who are you?

Old Jake: Maybe you, 20 years from now.

Dewey: (*Tries to laugh*) Man, what are you talking about? I ain't no damn wino.

Old Jake: You think I sit over there in that corner 'cause I'm in love with the taste of wine? You think Lucille's some kinda

sex maniac? Boy, I know you ain't that dumb. We was put here..... Just like you was.

Dewey: Hey man, I just come out here every once in a while to clear my mind up. That's all.

Old Jake: Yeah, I know. It was the same way with me, and Lucille. We came out here, to clear our minds up wit' fresh air. But after while, the fresh air wasn't enough. So I tried a little wine to help me. And she tried another man.

Dewey: Y'all just wasn't strong, that's all. Hell, it ain't no big thing for me to be out here. I could go home and never see this street again. Never even think about it anymore.

Old Jake: You strong.....?

Dewey: Damned right.

Old Jake: Then how come you're out here right now running away from your problems.

Dewey: Who says I'm running?

Old Jake: Them leather soles on your shoes for one. You done wasted more leather on this street in two weeks then I did in the past two years.

Dewey: So that don't mean nothing. Maybe I like to walk.

Old Jake: Come on. I'm trying to help you boy.

Dewey: Who says I want your help?

Old Jake: You do. Or else you woulda left a long time ago.

Dewey: *(Long pause as they stare)* You don't bullshit do you?

Old Jake: Ain't got time to. Wino's don't live very long.

Dewey: *(Slight pause getting his head together)* Man, I ain't even been able to sleep good for the past two weeks. Everytime I think about what that woman did I just.....I just..... Jake, it's either this street or suicide.

Old Jake: I know. But as low and filthy and short as this life is, it's still living.

Dewey: I told myself it didn't make no difference when I found out we had to get married. We was in love anyway. At least I thought we was. What makes a woman change so quick?

Old Jake: From what I hear, its the same thing that makes fire burn. Sponable cona something.

Dewey: Spontaneous combustion.

Old Jake: Yeah that's right. Some of them don't think at all. They just *(Waves his hands)* fsst.

Dewey: The perfect descriptions of her and her mother.

Old Jake: The mother in law!

Dewey: That broad ruined the marriage by herself. If she wasn't over the house, she was calling.

Old Jake: Um, um, um.

Dewey: Wouldn't let me be the man I was supposed to be, and never did release my wife's mind.

Old Jake: Slavery!

Dewey: Yeah. *(Realizes quickly what he said)* Yeah, thats exactly what it is. How you know so much about it?

Old Jake: I see you wasn't listening to me.

Dewey: Huh?

Old Jake: Remember when I said I was you 20 years from now?

Dewey: Oh, yeah. Yeah, sure. What's that supposed to mean?

Old Jake: Nothing really. Sometimes that wine spills into my thinking tank and they don't mix too good. You gonna smoke all them cigarettes in that pack?

Dewey: *(Takes a second to catch the subject change)* Uh.....you ain't finished the one you got.

Old Jake: What kinda thinking is that? When you bought that pack, it had 20 cigarettes in it right?

Dewey: Yeah, but.....

Old Jake: And you don't smoke all 20 of them at the same time do you?

Dewey: Naw.....

Old Jake: Naw, you don't. Would you buy cigarettes one at a time if you could?

Dewey: Of course not.

Old Jake: Then how come you give them to me one at a time?

Dewey: How you know I wanna give you any of them?

Old Jake: Aw now, cut that out. You know I know you.

Dewey: *(Throwing up his arms)* Hey man, now wait a minute. Woa. You gotta slow down a little bit. I don't know what you're talking about. You don't know me. You just met me.

Old Jake: And its good for you I did too. Where's it at?

Dewey: What?

Old Jake: You ain't forgot that cigarette.

Dewey: Aw man, here. Take the pack. *(Gives it to him)* If I want one, I'll ask you for it.

Old Jake: Yeah okay. *(Pause. As soon as he finishes one cigarette, he lights another)* That means you don't need them matches then do you?

Dewey: Shit! *(Going in his pocket and gets matches)* You should be working for Allstate the way you got your hands stuck out all the time.

Old Jake: What did she do?

Dewey: Who?

Old Jake: Your wife. You said she did something so wrong.

Dewey: Oh yeah. Damn, why did you bring that back up?

Old Jake: I got your cigarettes now. I ain't gotta be nice to you. Now what did she do?

Dewey: What's the worst thing a wife can do?

Old Jake: She caught you with another woman?

Dewey: Naw, I caught her.

Old Jake: With another woman?

Dewey: Naw, a man.

Old Jake: Make up your mind, now. Which one was it?

Dewey: It was a man.

Old Jake: Then what you complaining about? She ain't funny.

Dewey: (*Pauses and looks at him a few seconds*) What you trying to do man?

Old Jake: Something I been trying to do since you been here.

Dewey: What?

Old Jake: You gotta see that for yourself. You still love her?

Dewey: (*Caught him off guard again*) Uh, naw. I mean, why should I?

Old Jake: Why should you? "Should" ain't got nothing to do with it. Ain't nobody got that much control over love.

Dewey: After what she did to me? Jake, I got every right in the world to hate her.

Old Jake: Do you?

Dewey: No. Yes. I mean, that's what I'm walking these streets to find out.

Old Jake: Got another pair of shoes?

Dewey: Yeah.

Old Jake: Good. Walk on.

Dewey: What else can I do?

Old Jake: Start listening to what I'm saying. Did you try to talk to her?

Dewey: Damn right. I cussed her out for a whole hour.

Old Jake: I said talk *to* her not *about* her.

Dewey: What the hell have I gotta say *to* her?

Old Jake: You mean to tell me that you didn't do nothing but cuss for a whole hour? Man how many words do you know?

Dewey: I meant that's about all it amounted to.

Old Jake: You ask her why she did it?

Dewey: Naw.

Old Jake: How come?

Dewey: 'Cause I know why she did it. She did it just to spite me.

Old Jake: You sure?

Dewey: Yeah I'm sure. She couldn't be in love with the dude.

Old Jake: Why not?

Dewey: 'Cause she's my wife. I mean.....

Old Jake: You mean that living with you is so perfect that you just know she can't be in love with nobody else.

Dewey: It did sorta sound like that, didn't it?

Old Jake: 'Course it did. That's what you meant.

Dewey: No I didn't. I just meant that she really didn't have no reason to want nobody else. I treated her right..... *(Jake turns his head saying "um hm")* For real, man.

Old Jake: Who you trying to convince?

Dewey: You. Don't you understand what I'm talking about?

Old Jake: Want some of this wine? *(Jake takes a swallow)*

Dewey: Jake, I stayed home taking care of the baby while she was out fuckin' around. *(Jake just swallows)* Signed my paycheck over to her every week.....Even helped with the housework.

Old Jake: You didn't like the way she cleaned house?

Dewey: Naw, she...*(catches himself)* I helped with the housework because I thought she wanted help.

Old Jake: Uh huh.

Dewey: What's that supposed to mean?

Old Jake: Means this wine went down the wrong way. Gimme another nickel, so I can buy a better kind.

Dewey: *(Throws up his arms)* Man get that hand outa my face. I'm tired of lookin' at it.

Old Jake: You sho' is a hateful old niggah. Did she get on you about that?

Dewey: About what?

Old Jake: Always yelling around the house.

Dewey: How did.....? *(Catches himself again)* Man what are you talking about?

Old Jake: Um,um,um. I bet she didn't say nothing when you left the house.

Dewey: That's just it. She didn't care about anything I did.

Old Jake: You cared?

Dewey: Hell yeah!

Old Jake: Then why did you do it?

Dewey: Do what?

Old Jake: What you did. "She didn't care about anything I *did*," remember?

Dewey: I meant that she *wouldn't* care about what I did.

Old Jake: You sure?

Dewey: Yeah. (*Thinks*) Yeah to both of them.

Old Jake: Now you're catching on.

Dewey: Catching.....? Wait a minute.....(*From stage right enters Lucille*)

Old Jake: What you doing back here so quick?

Lucille: You buy a watch or something? You ain't been keeping up with my time schedule.

Old Jake: What you sounding so huffy about?

Lucille: Nothing. I'm just sick and tired of you old dirty men.

Old Jake: What happened?

Lucille: You see that thing that went off here with me a few minutes ago?

Old Jake: I heard him. Sounded pretty nice.

Lucille: Nice my ass. First he had me pay for his damn drink, then tried to steal my purse (*Looks over to Dewey*) Sorry 'bout what happened honey. A girl has to make a living somehow.

Dewey: I can dig it.

Lucille: He get your cigarettes yet?

Dewey: My matches too.

Lucille: That's Old Jake for you. Steal your shirt too if you was to let him.

Old Jake: Now hold on there, Lucille. Don't be lying to this boy about me.

Lucille: I ain't said nothing. You gonna let me have one of them cigarettes?

Old Jake: Now woman, if I was to go around giving away everything I had, I wouldn't have nothing left after while.

Lucille: It ain't bothered me yet.

Old Jake: Yeah, but what you got ain't been hot enough yet to burn up like these cigarettes.

Lucille: How you know?

Old Jake: I can tell be the way you walk.

Lucille: How?

Old Jake: 'Cause you walk too fast. See, you ain't even worried about catching on fire.

Lucille: Lawd today. Man you oughta be ashamed of yourself.

Dewey: You really ain't gonna give her no cigarette?

Old Jake: Hell naw.

Lucille: Then it's a good thing I don't smoke.

Dewey: Oh. You knew it all the time didn't you?

Old Jake: Knew what?

Dewey: Are you in on this too?

Lucille: In on what?

Dewey: Yeah, y'all play dumb now.

Old Jake: You know, that boy been talking like this since he been here.

Lucille: Maybe he's hooked on something?

Old Jake: You a dope head?

Dewey: If I was, we'd make one hell of a group wouldn't we?

Old Jake: What you say? One thing I can't stand is a smart-aleck niggah.

Lucille: But you gotta admit he is sorta cute. You bring your wallet with you honey?

Dewey: Naw, and it's a good thing I didn't 'cause Old Jake woulda probably had it by now.

Old Jake: Aw come on now, you got me all wrong. Damn, ask a niggah for a nickel and he try to claim you on his income tax!

Dewey: That's a quarter, some cigarettes, and some matches you got. Ain't no telling what else you're gonna try to get before I'm gone.

Old Jake: Lucille, tell this boy something.

Lucille: What you want me to tell him that he don't already know?

Old Jake: Now you know better than to talk like that. Don't be showing off in fronta this boy. I'll take this bottle and break it cross your head.

Lucille: We both know you ain't gonna do nothing long is it got some wine in it. *(Dewey laughs)*

Old Jake: What you laughing about?

Dewey: It's good to see you on the receiving end.

Old Jake: See what you done did?

Lucille: Me?

Old Jake: Yeah you. I'm trying to help this boy and you up here making me look like I don't know what I'm talking about.

Lucille: Do you?

Old Jake: Naw I just like to hear myself talk.

Lucille: What? Did I hear you right? You finally came out and said it?

Old Jake: *(Warning her)* You better go on away from here.....

Lucille: After all these years he finally said it.

Old Jake: I ain't playing now Lucille.....*(Moves toward her with the bottle raised. She slowly moves away still talking)*

Lucille: Lawd, I wish I had me a tape recorder now.

Old Jake: *(Raising the bottle and his voice)* Go on now Lucille. *(While they fight with Dewey between them Lucille picks Dewey's pocket.)*

Lucille: Dewey honey, you remember this night. Old Jake ain't told this much truth in his whole life. *(Exits quickly while laughing)*

Dewey: *(Still smiling)* Was you really gonna hit her?

Old Jake: *(Shakes bottle)* You hear that?

Dewey: Still some left. She coulda stayed then.

Old Jake: Naw, I woulda beat her to death with this paper bag. *(Jake opens bottle)* Sure you don't want none?

Dewey: Yeah.

Old Jake: Good. *(Swallows and savors the taste. Smacks his lips and then preaches)* Brother, a wife is just like your private wine cellar...Full of all that fruit flavored moisture that quenches your thirst. Those bottles stacked in a way that pleases a man even before he has tasted their contents. And all that you'll ever need to get you as high as you'll ever want to be.

Dewey: But now I'm sharing with somebody else. Why is that?

Old Jake: You musta left the door unlocked and somebody snook in while you wasn't taking care of what you was supposed to take care of.

Dewey: Why's it always gotta be my fault?

Old Jake: 'Cause you're the closest.

Dewey: What happened to your wine cellar? Did you forget to lock it?

Old Jake: Naw, I never had the key. Just stood on the outside looking in. Get awful thirsty living like that. *(Uncaps bottle and takes a drink)*

Dewey: But you're still living.

Old Jake: Very good. You 'bout got it now ain't you?

Dewey: Yeah. Yeah I think so.

Old Jake: *(Swallowing again)* 'Bout time.

Dewey: Yeah. Okay. It's all in the ways you look at it.

Old Jake: I'm outa wine. *(Turns bottle upside down)*

Dewey: I been blind as a bat.

Old Jake: Can you see if Ace's Drugs is still open?

Dewey: Maybe a talk won't hurt.

Old Jake: Damn, I hate walking that far. What size is your feet?

Dewey: Huh?

Old Jake: What size shoe you wear?

Dewey: Nine and a half. Why?

Old Jake: Why don't you give me that other pair a shoes you was talking 'bout.

Dewey: My shoes?

Old Jake: Yeah you don't need 'em now.

Dewey: You really think so?

Old Jake: Yeah. You see now.

Dewey: Yeah. Hell, naw you ain't getting my shoes.

Old Jake: Bring 'em by tomorrah evening. Then you can tell me what she said.

Dewey: I said you ain't getting my shoes.

Old Jake: I sho' hope they ain't brown. Something 'bout brown shoes make me sick to my stomach.

Dewey: Who says I'm even coming by tomorrow night?

Old Jake: How many times I gotta tell you.....

Dewey: Oh yeah, that's right, you know me. You're me 20 years from now. I still don't know what that's sposed to mean.

Old Jake: Yes you do. What am I?

Dewey: A wino.

Old Jake: Guess again.

Dewey: I don't know.

Old Jake: Come on now. Use that head of yours. Could you really imagine me as something else?

Dewey: Come to think of it.....that is strange.

Old Jake: No it ain't. You just didn't see it before.

Dewey: Never really did look.....damn.

Old Jake: Hey, you going down by Ace's Drugs?

Dewey: Naw. I'm going back this way.

Old Jake: Okay, then. I'll see you tomorrah night.

Dewey: No you ain't. *(He starts to walk away)*

Old Jake: Ain't you forgot something?

Dewey: Forgot? What?

Old Jake: One nickel. That's all I need on this wine,
brother. One nickel.

Dewey: Well look here, you better find someplace else to
get it 'cause I got your message now. I ain't gotta be nice to you.

Old Jake: There you go, stranger. *(They both exit in their
respective directions as the lights fade)*

Curtain